

## THE FIFTEEN BILLION DOLLAR ATHLETE

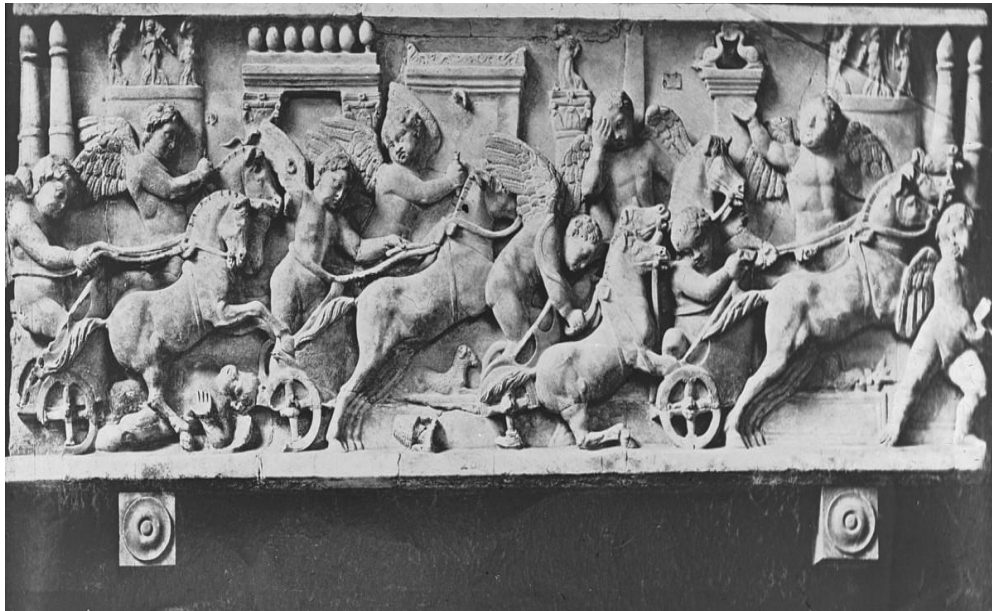
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Gaius Appuleius Diocles, a most likely illiterate man from the area of what is now Spain and Portugal, is the highest paid athlete the world has ever known.

By the time of his rather unusual death—calm and quiet! after *retirement!*—the Roman chariot racer's career earnings, marked down with admirable permanence in a stone inscription, totaled 35,863,120 sestertii. Diocles could feed grain to all of Rome for an entire year; made the most handsomely paid provincial governor's salaries five times over; could bankroll the Roman army, then at its world conquering height, for a fifth of a year.

Dr. Peter Struck, associate professor of classical studies at the University of Pennsylvania, using a comparative method, extrapolated a modern day net worth of something around 15 *billion* dollars.

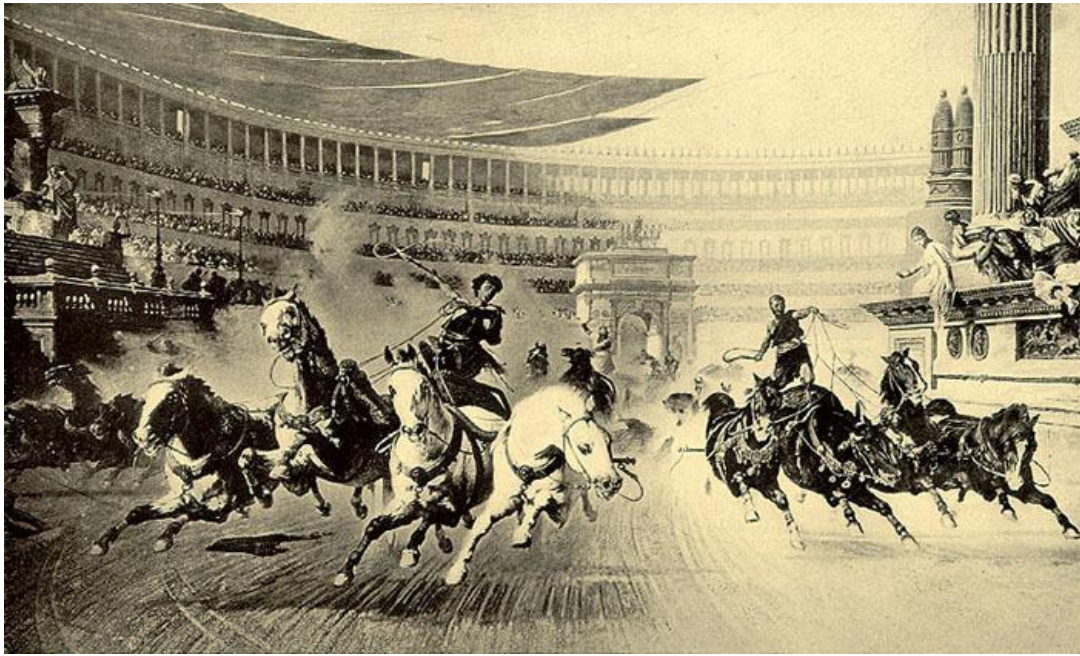


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It makes sense; aside from the romance which still smolders in the Western world for the classical era, the sheer size of the figure demanded attention. Fifteen billion dollars is such a sum, for one man, as to be staggering.

Is it any wonder Diocles was so highly paid, his skill set in such strong demand? Consider the circumstances: mounting a chariot—usually pulled by four horses, sometimes two, when really showing off, as many as 10—with the reins tied around his waist, drowning in the fevered cries of the 250,000 Romans who have packed the mighty Circus Maximus, what Struck poetically called "the beating heart at the center of the empire."

Thousands of pounds of muscle and metal, wood and blood, all careening about the track of the Circus, the knives flashing and wheels grinding as each full contact lap finds them attempting to ram each other into the *spinae*, the median, at the center of the track; now they come crashing into the hairpin turns, each revolution marked by destruction, death commonplace.



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Diocles is among the few to survive this maelstrom of a sport and reach retirement, which he took at age 42. Antiquity is laced with fabulous mournings by famed poets for even more famous chariot racers, many of whom did not live past their twenties. Scorpus, supremely talented and dead by 27, was honored by Martial, whose epitaph speaks to the racer's brief, yet glorious, place in Roman society:

"I am Scorpus, the glory of the roaring Circus, the object of Rome's cheers and her short lived darling. The Fates, counting not my years but the number of my victories, judged me to be an old man."

While the news outlets salivated over Diocles's immense fortune, it missed an important lesson encoded within his statistics. The Romans, as devout followers of sport as any modern society, kept meticulous records with regards to chariot racing; not only the charioteers, their earnings, and their victories, but also stats on the horses as well, which were famed athletes in their own right.

Diocles's final purse far outweighed all others—and has yet to be seriously challenged in the close to 1,869 years since he hung up his reins—yet he was *not* the winningest charioteer. As professor Robert B. Kebric points out in *The Career of Diocles, Roman Charioteer*, Diocles's 1,462 victories paled in comparison to Scorpus's 2,048 and Pompeius Musclosus's 3,559.

This, in combination with his massive earnings and recorded penchant, as noted by Kebric, for "trick racing" and engaging in novelty contests, suggests Diocles pursued his career in a manner we consider modern: He was chasing the money.

Some races were worth more than others, and Kebric's parsing of his record shows Diocles to have been a rather singular talent. 1,064 of his wins came in high stakes single entry races; he also notched 110 victories in opening races following grand processions in which the racers were a part. Such contests, Kebric writes, were "something like a 'feature race' with special significance attached to it."

"His victories were in bigger races," Struck says to explain how Diocles tops the earner's list but not the winner's.

There is evidence which suggests that Diocles sought not only money but personal glory—another supposedly modern malady—with his choice of team. The chariot teams inspired fevered devotion, reverberating with specific segments of the Empire's vast and varied population.

Diocles began his career as a White, before making a move to the Greens, a seemingly plum spot for any young charioteer. Yet he transferred to the less popular—and potentially less stacked—Reds, a move which had to have made financial sense (think a middling team signing a big free agent) and may have had personal motivations as well. It is entirely possible, perhaps likely, considering his aforementioned penchant for showmanship that Diocles wished to switch from the Greens, where he was one of many popular charioteers for a team with a storied history of them, so that he could write his own history with the Reds.

The showboating, paper chasing, fame-seeking athlete is an archetype that has existed since sport could first support it; ancient Greek Olympians were paid lavishly for their feats, and Diocles's world—filled with politics and filthy lucre, obsessed over by the Emperor and common citizen alike—eerily mirrors ours; no sporting scandal is truly unprecedented, which serves to underscore what is both amazing and tragic about sport as among our largest, longest tenured, and most sacred social constructs.

"It [greed, fame seeking, etc.] is not limited ... to the modern period," Struck says of the misconception "that people are somehow greedy now and they didn't used to be."

He chuckles.

"That's not the case. In fact, it's an underlying human phenomenon. People always want to have social capital, the respect of their peers, more of that is better. And they want to have money, and more of that is better. And I don't know of a society in which that's not the case.